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SUBJECT: AI Update: Guangdong Authorities Coming Clean?

REFERENCE: A) GUANGZHOU 6294, B) GUANGZHOU 8517

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1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Guangdong provincial health and
veterinary officials are showing increased levels of
openness and cooperation. On March 29, officials hosted a
private information meeting for Guangzhou foreign consulates
about the March 2 human avian influenza (AI) death and
subsequent health policies. The initiative to hold such an
event and Chinese inter-agency cooperation are both good
signs. However, questions remain about the general AI
threat level and potential future transparency. END
SUMMARY.

Meet the Press: Cantonese Style

2. (SBU) On March 2, Guangdong province had its first
confirmed human AI death (reftel A). On March 4, Guangzhou
Consulates learned about the case. On March 29, Guangdong
officials hosted a private "press conference" for the
Guangzhou foreign consulates. The event was unique in terms
of the attempt at openness and inter-agency cooperation
among Chinese government officials. The event also builds
on previous breakthroughs by Post, namely a March 23
planning meeting for a possible digital video conference
(DVC) between Guangdong health and agricultural officials
and relevant U.S. medical officials housed at Embassy
Bangkok (reftel B). The March 29 special meeting included
officials from the Guangdong Veterinary Station of Epidemic
Prevention and Supervision, the Guangdong Health Department,
and the Guangdong Center of Disease Control (CDC).
Officials from about half of Guangzhou's 23 consulates were
in attendance.

3. (SBU) The Guangdong officials conveyed that they are

taking the recent human death case very seriously and seeking to improve their policies. Officials are working in six different ways to improve Guangdong's prevention and response mechanisms: alerting and information abilities; technical and personnel capabilities; vaccination storage materials and implementation; cooperation with all relevant departments; cooperation with other regions (i.e., Hong Kong, Macau); and public awareness.

Background on Guangdong Poultry and Human Threat

¶4. (SBU) Mr. Yu Yedong of the Guangdong Veterinary Station began the meeting describing Guangdong's potential source for AI and the government reaction before and after the March 2 human case. Guangdong is China's largest source of poultry. In 2005 the province was estimated to have 1.36 billion poultry, or approximately one bird for each PRC citizen, accounting for 52.3 percent of China's overall poultry population.

¶5. (SBU) Yu next described the events surrounding Guangdong's only confirmed human AI death. On March 2, a 30-year old Guangzhou native (surnamed Lao) died (reftel A). On March 4, two national laboratories independently confirmed the case was AI and the Ministry of Health announced the results to the provincial authorities. On March 3, the provincial health authorities enacted their contingency plan to contain AI. All close contacts of Mr. Lao (124 people) were quarantined, and special hospitals in Guangdong were put on "tier-three alert". On March 6, Hong Kong and Macau health experts met with equivalent Guangdong officials. Throughout the ordeal, World Health Organization officials were never contacted. The tier-three alert level

was recalled on March 14.

Scorecard of Guangdong Implementation Success

¶6. (SBU) The Guangdong officials described in some detail how they are improving policies in the six aforementioned areas. Alert and information abilities: Since 2004, Guangdong Party Secretary Zhang Dejiang and Guangdong Governor Huang Huahua have placed Guangdong on "high alert" and asked all departments to implement relevant measures at the three main levels of governance: provincial, municipal and county. In October 2005, Guangdong began creating 43 provincial monitoring stations, which provide advance information on the AI situation. (When asked by PolOff about the capabilities of these stations, the officials provided only a limited answer. In terms of staffing, some stations like Guangzhou have 130 staff, Shenzhen has around ¶60. Other cities have only 10-20 people and in the countryside the stations are even smaller.).

¶7. (SBU) Technical and personnel materials: Last year the province invested 200 million RMB (\$250,000) in AI programs and this year has already spent 8.5 million RMB (\$1.06 million) on vaccination programs. Additionally, health officials have received special training on how to manage AI cases.

¶8. (SBU) Vaccination storage materials and implementation: Over 1.2 billion poultry have been vaccinated (98 percent of the province's poultry) using a domestic Chinese vaccination. Last year the veterinary department took 190,000 blood samples and found their vaccination to be 95 percent effective. After 14 days the birds develop a strong immunity to the disease. Emergency materials for health personnel have also increased, including increasing stocks of Tamiflu.

¶9. (SBU) Cooperation with all relevant agencies: The government has increased exchanges with other departments, including broadening cooperation with the Department of Education; Department of Transportation; Department of Forestry (to collect dead birds for lab tests) and the South

China Endangered Species Center (to monitor migratory birds).

¶10. (SBU) Cooperation with other regions: Guangdong CDC and public health officials have had multiple meetings with Hong Kong and Macanese officials on how to handle a public health emergency.

¶11. (SBU) Public Awareness: The Guangdong government has increased the amount of public "propaganda". There have been more television interviews with doctors than during SARS, and AI informational signs now hang in most hospitals and medical centers.

Whodunnit?: Mr. Lao's Death Remains a Mystery

¶12. (SBU) Guangdong has over half of China's poultry population and one confirmed human case, yet no confirmed poultry deaths in the past two years. The burning question at the meeting was: "What was the source of the human death?" The officials said they still do not know the source but assumed it came from one of the 12 marketplaces in which Lao had spent significant time. Though Yu of the Veterinary Station believed both future poultry outbreaks and repeated human infections were possible, he ruled out human-to-human outbreaks in the short term.

Transparency Issues

¶13. (SBU) PolOff asked specifically about the rules of reporting suspected and confirmed AI cases. All final confirmation of AI cases remains with the Ministry of Health in Beijing, requiring two separate labs to confirm a death. Information of an AI death can only be released to the public after this confirmation. However, Guangdong authorities may release information on any suspected cases when they choose. The Guangdong officials agreed to consider sending information via e-mail instead of the slower diplomatic note process. The former method was used during some of the worst days of SARS. (In the recent human AI case, Lao was suspected of having AI on March 2, but the information was not released until March 4).

Comment: Improvement and Continuing Problems

¶14. (SBU) The unspoken message from this special meeting was obvious: Guangdong does not want another SARS. It is believed Guangzhou city was the source of the SARS outbreak, during which the provincial government was criticized for apathy, cover-up and economic downturn. At the moment, it is unclear whether the increased transparency resulted from foreign or domestic pressure. In terms of influencing the Guangdong medical response, Post will continue to increase contact with officials through methods such as the planned digital video conference. However, because of their access to internal Guangdong meetings, Hong Kong officials also remain an important conduit for expressing U.S. concern. Overall, Guangdong officials should be praised for hosting the meeting and working with other government departments. However, they still seem reluctant to inform the public of suspected cases and working with outside groups such as the WHO and USG.

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